

Memoir of my college exchange semester

Jeffry Piker -- Jan-Feb, 2018

On a warm, sunny day early in September, 1960, my parents and I drove from our home in Cincinnati toward the Great Smoky Mountains in eastern Tennessee. I was 20 years old and about to start my third undergraduate year at Oberlin College in northern Ohio, where I was a sociology major -- but this term I would be a one-semester exchange student at a university in Nashville. We would enjoy a few days in the Smokies, before driving to Nashville in time for orientation and registration at my new school.

That day we got as far as Johnson City in Tennessee's Blue Ridge Mountain foothills. At a local family restaurant, we each ordered fried chicken with biscuits – a delicious meal.

As we finished our meal, the owner brought us our bill and warmly thanked us for coming to his restaurant. He was white like the rest of the staff I saw, except for one young black man bussing tables. We commented about how much we liked the food, the restaurant and the setting of the town. To this day I remember his reply: "Yes, we have a pleasant town here. Not many niggers or Jews."

Well, that was a conversation-stopper. His words came at us like a bolt from the blue – and not only because they were so casually ugly and blatantly bigoted. We were Jewish. And in three days I would be a student at Fisk University, a black school and one of the oldest and most highly respected of the Negro colleges and universities located all around the South.

(For the remainder of my memoir, I will use 'Negro' rather than 'black' because that was the designation most often used and preferred in those days, in the liberal white neighbourhood I had come from.)

Three days later, my parents dropped me and my belongings at Fisk outside the orientation headquarters, and left for their return trip to Cincinnati.

I already knew some Fisk students from my high school. Barbara Crosby was a dear friend from my class. I recall asking Barbara why she had decided to attend Fisk (meaning, without saying so, a Negro college). I eventually came to realize that my question had come from the arrogance of my white privilege – from my assumption that she might well have gone to a 'better quality', majority-white school. I also remember her answer: "I was tired of fighting against racial prejudice all the time. I just wanted to enjoy my college education."

After registering, I hung out at the Student Union -- looking around, meeting a few students. I was there in mid-afternoon, when an upper-year student approached me, big smile on his face, and introduced himself. He could tell I was an exchange student. With a wink in his eye, he said to me, "You must be a sociology major, come here to study us Negro folks." Bingo.

I clearly remember my two English courses with Robert Hayden. He was a noted poet, a sweet and self-effacing Negro man and a genuinely supportive teacher. It was the joy I felt each day to come to class and spend time with such a revered writer and scholar, yet so personable and humble a teacher. I got into the coursework with enthusiasm, with Prof. Hayden as my guide and stimulus. No better way to learn from a teacher. *(He would eventually be*

officially designated 'poet laureate' in the U.S., from 1976-'78 – the first Negro poet to be given that honour .)

The first lunch-counter sit-in of the Civil Rights movement had happened a half year earlier, on Feb. 1, 1960, in Greensboro, N.C. Four students at the local Negro college, North Carolina A&T, went to a downtown Woolworth's and sat at the lunch counter, waiting to be served. They would need to wait forever; Negroes were never served at lunch counters in department stores across the South (and elsewhere in the U.S.).

The word spread and Nashville quickly became a centre of sit-in activity. My desire to experience that reality and to gain insight about it was important in my decision to spend the 1960 fall/winter term on exchange at Fisk. I participated in one lunch-counter sit-in – on a warm, sunny afternoon in the middle of the term.

It took place at a down-town department store without an integrated lunch counter. I and the other participants received careful and detailed non-violence training at Rev. Kelly Miller Smith's Negro Baptist church ahead of time. Our procedures were clarified, our leaders were identified, and our non-violent reactions were practised. We rode public transit to the store. Nothing eventful happened: we didn't get served; whites in the store stared at us, hurling abusive comments without physically harassing us; some police were present, all white men, observing the scene, keeping things 'orderly' by their presence; we waited a few hours; and then we left.

Music was everywhere present in my time at Fisk. I had enjoyed music my entire life: children's songs and camp songs, Broadway musicals, pop music,

Negro spirituals, country music, cautious steps into classical music and jazz, and especially folk music.

At Fisk the music I heard everywhere was rhythm and blues and what was just starting to be called 'soul music': Ray Charles, of course, known there as 'the high priest'; Sam Cooke; Etta James; Little Richard; James Brown and so many more. I was slightly aware that Negro music (sometimes called 'race music') had its own rich history, independent of white tastes and venues. But I hadn't yet really connected with it on the level I was able to feel at Fisk.

I don't remember clearly whether I took my 5-string banjo with me to Fisk. I think I must have, but it would have taken courage to do so. I couldn't yet play it very well. (I still play banjo 58 years later...a tad better than I did then.) The banjo had originally come to the Western Hemisphere in the minds and hearts of African slaves, so what would it mean for a white boy to carry a banjo to a Negro school?

My long-time love of country music meant that I was well-aware that Nashville was the home (downtown in Ryman Auditorium) of The Grand Old Opry, and I dearly wanted to go there some Saturday night to see it live. Problem for me: I seriously doubted that Negroes would be allowed in. Solution: Without telling anyone, one Saturday night I hopped a bus, went downtown and saw The Opry. I never told a soul at Fisk about my excursion. Result: a life-long mix of shame for having done it, and pride that I'd actually been to Ryman to see the Opry live.

A few days before the 1960 U.S. presidential election (Kennedy vs. Nixon), I wasn't feeling at all well: achy, fever, lack of energy. I took myself to the student

health service, located at Maharry, the Negro medical school across the street. The doctor did his tests and made his diagnosis: I had the flu and I should drink fluids and get lots of rest. When I left his clinic, I found myself worrying that maybe his diagnosis was not correct, maybe I had something worse than flu, maybe I needed a prescription for medicine. My family's doctor in Cincinnati had given me the name of a doctor he knew in Nashville – no surprise, a white man like himself. I took myself to that doctor's office and was able to see him quickly. His diagnosis: I had the flu and I should drink fluids and get lots of rest. This would not be the last time that I would see my own racial prejudice at work – but it was an excellent opportunity for me to clearly recognize it for what it was.

It was at Fisk that I first began to see and feel that I have race. Sure, I already knew about the idea of 'race'. Growing up in Cincinnati, I well understood that the Negro race had long been poorly treated – oppressed -- in the U.S. In all that time, though, I never thought of *myself* as having race. Certainly, I had learned the North American folk tale which says there are five races: yellow, black, red, brown and white. That belief had seeped inside me from a very young age, before I'd even become aware that it was happening. I'd come to take it for granted. Yet I'd never really, deeply thought of myself as *having race*. I was just a *normal* person. It was those *other colours* who have race.

After my exchange semester, I would never think that way again. My whiteness had meanings and implications for myself, which I realized I needed to work to understand far better in my life ahead.